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ABSTRACT

Upper-level institutions of higher education, offering course work at only the junior, senior, and in some cases postgraduate level, are discussed. Two upper-level institutions that are part of the University of Houston system are cited as examples: The University of Houston at Clear Lake City and the University of Houston Victoria Campus. In the past 15 years approximately 25 upper-level institutions with a combined enrollment of some 75,000 students have been created. It is suggested that the emergence of these institutions is an attempt to modify and restructure the traditional American four-year baccalaureate program. Survey results indicate that students attending upper-level institutions are primarily older, part-time students who commute to class and appear to be relatively goal-oriented. Partially because they are new, upper-level institutions are small and are experiencing enrollment shortfalls similar to other higher education institutions. Two periods of growth are noted in the history of these institutions. The first began in the late 1960's when educational innovation became popular. However recent years have seen a return to traditional forms of instruction and degree requirements at upper-level institutions. Expansion of these institutions to providing freshman and sophomore curricula as well as postgraduate degrees is also discussed. It is suggested that through expansion of programmatic offerings the upper-level institutions may hope to alleviate the problem of small enrollments and become more like traditional universities. (SF)

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A NATIONAL STUDY OF UPPER-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS: SOME INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

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The emergence of the upper-level institution on the American college scene represents an attempt to modify and restructure the traditional American four-year baccalaureate that is worthy of investigation. An upper-level institution is one which offers course work at only the junior, senior, and in some cases post-graduate levels. In the past fifteen years, approximately twenty-five upper-level institutions with current combined enrollments of some 75,000 students have been created. Although eleven states have upper-level institutions, two states -- Texas and Florida -- lead the nation in the number of such institutions as well as the total number of students served.

The University of Houston System is a system of four campuses, two of which are upper-level institutions: the University of Houston at Clear Lake City and the University of Houston Victoria Campus. For the past one and one-half years, the U.H. System office has conducted a national study of upper-level institutions, seeking to examine the unique philosophical and operational considerations that guide these colleges. The purpose of the study

is two-fold: (1) To make a contribution to the research literature in higher education on the subject of a new institutional type, and (2) To assist the University of Houston System in its planning efforts for a third upper-level campus to be located in the northern Houston area.

The study has consisted of two separate phases. Initially, a comprehensive set of questionnaires was distributed to all of the upper-level institutions in the United States. This questionnaire addressed such issues as the creation, planning, and opening of the institution; the nature of the relationships with area two-year colleges, particularly regarding articulation of academic programs; the demographic composition of the student body with the resulting special need for various student services; the academic mission and programmatic offerings of the institution; and finally, budgetary and financial considerations. A response rate of over seventy-five percent was realized, thus lending credibility to the study. The second phase, which is currently underway, has consisted of site visits to upper-level institutions for the purpose of clarifying impressions and obtaining additional first-hand information on campus operations. As of this time, eleven institutions in eight states have been visited.

The purpose of this paper is to offer some initial observations on the current status of upper-level institutions. It should be viewed not as a final or conclusive document, but rather as an opportunity to begin to crystalize some thoughts about the upper-

level movement.

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It is appropriate to begin with an examination of certain demographic characteristics of the student bodies of upper-level institutions. Various informal descriptive accounts of upper-level student bodies have typically used the following words: older, married, employed, evening, part-time, and commuting. The current study sought to gather specific data to verify the accuracy of these descriptors. And, indeed, information from twenty-one institutions for the academic year 1977-78 confirmed this profile of the upper-level student body. The median full-time/part-time distribution was thirty-two percent full-time and sixty-eight percent part-time. Only one quarter of the campuses had residential facilities, and of those, only an average of fourteen percent of the students lived on campus. The median age was thirty-one, and the median number of semester credit hours per student was eight. Finally, the median percentage employed was eighty-seven percent. Today, two years later, there is reason to believe that these data have not substantially changed.

Several observations can be made from this student profile. It appears to the author that the most critical characteristic of the upper-level student body is its commuting nature. Commonly held views about the negative impact of a commuting student body on the intellectual life of a campus, the less than full-time commitment of the commuting student, and the diminished opportunity

for some important socialization experiences for the commuting student all seem to be clearly applicable to the upper-level institution. Much of the criticism voiced by administrators and faculty regarding the quality of the academic experience available to students at upper-level institutions is in actuality more an indictment of the shortcomings of commuter institutions than it is a statement on the shortcomings of upper-level institutions. Recent interviews with these administrators and faculty on several upper-level campuses attest to the strength of their desire to either build or expand residential facilities at their institutions, although due to financial or political constraints, the prospects in most cases are quite bleak. A second important notion to be derived from the data on upper-level student bodies concerns the seriousness of purpose of upper-level students. Whereas one typically finds considerable indecisiveness by freshmen and sophomores on such matters as choice of major and choice of career as well as vacillation in level of motivation, the upper-level student brings to the institution a clearer sense of purpose and a greater degree of self-directed behavior. The final characteristic worthy of mention concerns the place-bound nature of the upper-level student body. For all practical purposes, the overwhelming proportion of students at these institutions reside in the communities immediately surrounding the school. In most cases, only a very small minority of the student body relocate from distant areas. The size of the population of the region surrounding the institution is therefore a critical measure of the future potential growth of the school, and bodes ill for those upper-level institutions

that are situated in small urban areas.

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Moving to another topic, upper-level institutions are currently experiencing enrollment shortfalls not at all dissimilar to those faced by other institutions of higher education. Partially because they are new, upper-level institutions are relatively small. Total headcount in 1977-78 ranged from two hundred (West Oahu College of the University of Hawaii) to eleven thousand (Florida International University), although the median headcount figure was only two thousand students. In most instances, the actual current enrollment figure falls considerably short of earlier projections of enrollment growth. However, these earlier projections were usually cast with an eye toward the political necessity of arguing for the creation and subsequent funding of these campuses and did not always reflect rigorous forecasting techniques. In any event, most upper-level institutions have not yet reached a point of "critical mass" in terms of either student headcount or student FTE and as such, have not been able to realize any significant economies of scale. Additionally, since most upper-level institutions are public and are in states that use enrollment-driven formula-funding systems, they have suffered the consequences of state appropriations that are lower than originally anticipated. In this respect, the upper-level institution does not differ from other colleges and universities experiencing enrollment losses.

As was stated earlier, the upper-level institutions that currently exist in the United States are all relatively new. The

oldest is Florida Atlantic University which began in 1964, and the newest is West Oahu College which opened in 1976. Despite their brief histories, upper-level institutions in many instances appear to have experienced two discernible phases of growth. Many upper-level institutions, particularly those that began in the late 1960's, wholeheartedly embraced at the outset the notion of innovation as their guiding spirit in both curricular and organizational matters. In the initial stages, it was not uncommon to find considerable utilization of self-paced courses, individualized instruction, educational technology, pass-fail grading systems, and credit for "life experience". While such innovative techniques can and do have educational merit, there were frequently some negative by-products that accompanied this experimental spirit. For example, some upper-level institutions found themselves with unusually high levels of incompletes, haphazard enforcement of admissions requirements, inconsistent grading standards, questionable procedures for the awarding of credit, and serious problems with suspension and probation. One institution became commonly known as "Give-Away U". In the realm of academic organization, many upper-level institutions began with non-traditional inter-departmental or even non-departmental structures, which were accompanied by profound decentralization of the academic decision-making process. Programs and courses were given unorthodox titles, degree requirements were stated in vague terms, and there was a tremendous amount of ambiguity and discontinuity in the curriculum. At one institution, each college independently published its own quite different catalogue, and there was no unified approach to courses and degrees.

With the passage of time, many curricular and organizational changes have slowly become evident. In recent years, one has begun to notice a return to traditional forms of instruction, with less dependence upon educational technology, stricter enforcement of academic standards, and greater attention by the institution to clear articulation of course objectives and degree requirements. Faculties which were originally organized quite informally have in recent years begun to develop departmental or quasi-departmental structures, particularly as issues of promotion and tenure become important on a particular campus. In short, one observes an initial phase in which an institution was most willing to experiment and innovate followed by a more recent period in which a return to more traditional forms of instruction and organization have emerged.

A similar pattern can be observed in the presidencies of upper-level institutions. Many upper-level institutions began with presidents who functioned primarily as visionaries of an academic mission, articulators of an educational idea, and interpreters to the public of the unique educational opportunities afforded by their new institution. However, many of these founding presidents encountered difficulty in implementing their educational philosophy and mission for their institution, either because their visions were greater than the available resources, enrollments didn't materialize, or internal problems developed. Nevertheless, these presidents played a critical role in developing institutional character and establishing priorities and directions

for academic programs. Many of these initial presidents have in time (usually five to eight years) been followed by second presidents who in contrast, perceive their role as consolidators, as program implementers, and as individuals who must translate an originally noble idea into a workable academic program structure for an institution of higher education in the late 1970's. From this author's perspective, the two types of presidents are appropriate, given the phase of growth and maturity of the institution.

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Finally, it is worthwhile to offer a few observations about the current self-perception of upper-level institutions. It is this author's feeling that upper-level institutions today are troubled by their "un-university-like" status, and are striving to resemble other universities in form and substance. The residential aspirations to which we alluded earlier is one manifestation of this desire. In addition, in the state of Florida, several upper-level institutions are currently involved in an effort to add the lower division to their institutions so that they may have fuller control over the baccalaureate education of their students. This, of course, represents the boldest challenge to the essential concept upon which the upper-level institutions were originally founded. Although these proposed lower division programs are couched in such terms as "special purpose", "limited enrollment", and "narrow focus", some observers speculate that this represents the opening of the wedge into full four-year status for the upper-level institutions in Florida. At the other end of the programmatic spectrum, and on a much more limited scale, there are some

upper-level institutions that currently offer only Bachelors degrees and wish to begin to offer Masters degrees, and there are others that currently offer Masters degrees and would like to initiate limited doctoral offerings. Whether it be expansion at the lower level or at the graduate level, however, the pattern seems to be quite similar: the upper-level institution seeks through expansion of programmatic offerings to address the problem of enrollment shortfalls and at the same time make their institutions more "university-like". The success of such efforts and the resulting impact on the upper-level movement remain to be see